Indonesia's New Art Movement '75

As the "Indonesia's New Art Movement Exhibition '75" was due to open, a friend made a remark, "Strange that none of you seem anxious about this exhibition." I didn't really care much about where the direction of that remark was headed, so I replied nonchalantly, "Maybe because there are so many of us." There were ten of us who were exhibiting present: Hardi, Munni Ardhi, Siti Adyati, Nanik Mirna, Harsono, Pandu Sudewo, Bachtiar Zainoel, Muryoto Hartoyo, Ris Purwana, and myself. The time showed midnight, so if my friend had the above opinion, it was hardly an exaggeration. By then there was not a single work hung, and what's more, no one seemed to be working, each minding their own business, horsing around, or sleeping. But was this the only reason for my friend to comment on the lack of tension in the air? Maybe not, the question was not directed so simplistically. What, then?

In the midst of the joking around and the relaxed atmosphere I felt that there was a tension brewing. This surfaced in the morning, when one of us commented, "We must be ready for disappointment, since if this exhibition was praised we will be disappointed, but if it was scorned, ridiculed, then in turn we will be disappointed also." It's true that this consequence must have been implicitly felt beforehand. It might have even entered real consideration. Hence our defense mechanism of nonchalance. We knew full well that this exhibition may seem rebellious, confrontational and insane if not downright anarchic. But we were nonetheless certain that this was one way to express our "opinions". And like any other opinion it had the right to stand on its own, not with the intention of forcing itself but also far from feeling belittled, that that opinion was wrong, "green", or even "amateurish." Still in that dining table, we rounded up what people thought of this exhibition, based on eavesdropping. And the conclusion was short, "none." Because small talk can't seriously be considered as an opinion. The tension I had felt found its basis, and breakfast was finished off with jest and curses that were pointed to no one or nothing in particular.

It was not until a few days later that we came across a few stern opinions, and the dining table had the honour of witnessing a report. There were a few neutral ones. There were some who said, "This exhibition may only seem meaningful if it was seen as a whole." And those who

were unhappy retorted, “This exhibition is crass and profane,” and still under the same tone there were those who said, “Why is there a need to display things that are dirty, sadistic, isn’t there still beauty and grace in this world, shouldn’t it alarm us when our art veers towards this filth?” All of these opinions do hit the target spot-on. The New Art Exhibition did display tendencies that are ‘wholly other’, even if not equally, in its conclusion that this tendency stems from “profanity”, violence, filth and perhaps sadism, by turning the question around: Should the life that art represents be one of purity, pleasantness, alluring dreams, religious escapism, compensations by imageries of the ideal?

Joy, merriness, beauty may all turn the stomach at a point, not because they bore, but because they make us complacent, anaestheticizes us and are so often fake. Reality contains a dark side, which is not pleasant, not happy, and may even be painful. Thus, isn’t it perhaps this current sense of “pain” that we are trying to make comparisons with?

Yet besides these opinions there is also the opinion about the title, the part that stands out the most, which is the “new”. This “new” was immediately associated with a “renewal”. From then, it was demanded that reasons for this renewal and their “principles” be explained, and if there wasn’t any “new” predicate then it was considered to be arrogant nonsense. Following this the “new” is taken to be a defiance against pre-existing tendencies, understood as the manifesto of a group as if wishing for a coup, to break apart the inertia that surrounds art, and such like.

I believe that these opinions are all spoken out of context. This exhibition was not observed thoroughly, and the catalogue was not read critically. Everyone is busy with their own imagination. Everybody is of course entitled to their own interpretation, but what is interpretation if the object is in fact being overlooked, for this becomes nothing more than mere fiction.

Thus I think it is best to clarify what we mean by the term the “new”. It doesn’t point to a judgement. It must be read as a predicate to the subject of “art”. It is a modest claim, to say that it refers to a number of tendencies that are outside of the norm. None of us are blind to how these confront us directly in this exhibition. Here we may also see how the boundaries in art are being transgressed. Most of the works displayed are not meant to be taken as sculpture, painting, and so on, but more works, articulation.

If we want to stretch this “new” to its maximum limits then it implies an aim, to look for something new, as if moving from an old, stifling house to another house in order to give us a change of scenery.

Then we try to question this “new” from another angle. Is it really the manifestation of a pack of heroes who tries to break art from its inertia? This sounds too much like a slogan. The “slogan” of a battle without any clear battlefield or any clear enemy. Who is the hero, who is being defended, and what is it being defended against. Well, I think that this slogan was born almost automatically, since in our art world quarreling, strife, whether a “cold war” or full-on dispute, has becomes its own “convention”. It is hardly a surprise that people are so quick to follow this line of thinking.

Even if there is a revolt, a defiant arrogance in this Indonesia New Art Movement ’75, it is based on several of its own anxieties, its own dormancy, the breaking down of dogmas that it itself holds in order to come up with its own conclusions. Whether these conclusions will gain wider meaning or pass as mere drivel was never the goal or the consideration. This is the speculative worth that lies implicit in any “belief”. Thus there was no responsibility felt for other than providing a clear argumentation. Isn’t this better than any intellectual-scepticism that is so often found in art that does not much more than posing queries, suggestions, and in the end fails to give an actual opinion. Or to act like a naive artist, so that it is no longer clear whether one is really unable to speak or is simply acting out. Or to talk about how absurd art is, how profound art is, how universal art is until it comes back full circle on itself and becomes incomprehensible.

Just like any other opinions, the eleven statements of Indonesia New Art Movement ’75 is aware of the reasons behind its anxieties, its inertia, its dissatisfaction. From generational conflict, dogmatic affiliations, the alienation of art to a peaceful departure due to boredom. This is our vision and it is here that we are able to speak a great deal, every point of view will always be interesting to discuss since many people are involved here, many “visions” to be argued for and against.

The discussion that took place on August 4th really aimed at providing an opportunity for this “talk”, to compete against each other’s outlooks. But just as any other discussions about art this didn’t seem to go as planned. This dead-end drove Kompas to ask me to write this article.

So here we are going to carry on the discussion of Agust 4th by first asking, “What is the heart of the problem that became the “conclusion” of New Art Movement ’75?” From what I noted, it was accepted that we all claim for a “desire to communicate”. The concept behind all of our eleven statements may be translated here. What does it mean to take up social problems as a theme, sickening sosial conflicts, or the desire to express as a form statement about a certain environment, or the theme of reflection upon life, or to mock by way of playing, or to take the poster and the effects of colour as an idiom. The conceptions of working in these eleven statements are driven by this main idea. For example: the conception of tangibility speaks about the audience’s physical involvement, in the sense that if the audience’s awareness may not be shaken then at least we can mess around with their physical being. And here the distance between the actual world of the audience and the imaginary world of the work of art is annihilated. The conception of the mirror that puts “actual space” in the work may still be categorised under this tangibility. Another thing is the conception of “objects”, whether they be everyday objects, industrial objects, or collages made from newspaper that talk about common associations, the conception of poster pictures and optical effects that talks about the effects of colour elements, compositional lines that are most accepted and naive, pleasant; the conception of “exhibiting”, showing, considerations that invite the audience to speak directly; conceptions about “non-seismograph” that bullies methods which may seem “alienated” like subtle emotional language on lines or other media that becomes the defining visual language of painting, sculpture, or other branches of the arts.

“The desire to communicate”, where should this term be directed; Does it mean to look for a “communicative” language or rather “the desire to express, to make a claim”. The answer to this is: both. Why? In order to avoid easy conclusions: If we simply want communicative images with a naturalistic technique, even with realism and common subject matters, be it landscape, nude women, the market, or the like. Well, it seems that we need to look for the reason behind this “desire to communicate” that is more ambitious in its search for “content” and “language”.

If we look at Sanento Yuliman’s article “A New Perspective” in the Indonesia New Art Movement Exhibition ’75 catalogue, we will find that “... a painting as the visible manifestation of the artist’s soul means that a painting is made up of brushstrokes, scratches and marks that records the movements of the artist’s hands, akin to the sensitive needle of seismograph, noting

down the temperaments and emotional tokens of the artist. A painting is the extension of handwriting and fingerprints (in clay sculptures), chiseling (wood), the motion of contours and areas, the creation of the delicate hands of the artist."

Then here we are not mistaken to conclude that: In matters of art we already move in the direction of problems about lines, colours, compositions, surface qualities and forms, even if there is "X-factor" that is often put in as that "which may never be searched". It makes sense, if this creates a "degeneration" in themes and subject matters in works of art, reaching its heights with "abstract" forms. In a work of art, it is no longer important whether it is an image of a ship, a river, of people, sketches, or squares.

Our modern art has left the aesthetic tendency to depart from "imitation" and rely on interpretations and tendencies that thinks that art as an eruption of emotions (Rousseau, Herder, Göethe). Hence, lines, colours, compositions, the arrangement of spaces becomes a final "statement" of the artist's emotions, and not the image. This becomes clear if we turn our talk about art to the "theory of art". Virgil C. Aldrich in his book *The Philosophy of Art* (Prentice Hall Inc., N. Y. 1963) makes approximately the following statement: The subject matter of the work may be said to be outside of the actual work. A subject matter, for instance, "people in love" may be imagined without having to see the work of art. Then what happens to the subject matter in the artistic process? Aldrich wrote that an artist makes the subject matter present in the work in order to open up a continuous dialogue. This subject matter stirs the emotion of the artist, and this is transformed into lines, colours, or other elements. This is why the normal "image" that we may see in a work, is for Aldrich its "content" rather than an imaginary aspect of its "representation". Roughly, the work is not "allowed" to be seen as an image which "imagines" something else through lines and colours, but "must" be seen as lines, colours, spaces coming into formation, creating an image (how difficult it is to look at art.) This is what Aldrich terms "the use of an expression" and he considers that expression is not an articulation (Well!)

If it may be called a consequence, the above perspectives may have the following effect: an artist will then aim for a number of elements in the artwork that grow increasingly subtle and "perhaps" even more essentialistic in its arrangement. The subject matter and theme must then be even more carefully selected, individual, and worked at consistently.

Well, if we wish to talk about “articulation” which nota bene is still an addition to the idea of the “surrounding environment”, then we have missed out on tens of steps. Take the layman, ask him to make a painting that resembles a cat, if accidentally the artist is a cat lover. It is certain that what he sees initially is the image of the cat. Then, not only is the cat not very interesting, this layperson also has to wait patiently (if he is willing) for hours in front of the face of that painting so that lines, the meaning behind compositions, colour nuances, enters his psyche, but this is all a huge “if”. Now, whether essentialistic or not, the image of the cat is the reality, just as if we want to ask from a terrible appreciation who is to blame, the audience or the artist.

Even if this may seem far too hypothetical, it is not such a big mistake to say that this situation drives art towards alienation. Art becomes an exceptional activity, with its own special language and boundaries.

We may continue to see if this tendency may at some point develop. The reality about art does not stop at Sudjojono only. Emotions may be debated. Whether this accussation is made based on instinct or intuition, in reality it becomes less believable, questioned about to what point is this true. Any intensive study about art theory, any intensive theory about artistic tendencies make exasperating theories even more pressing. From then, an “outside” process of art production becomes important, whether it be an area of canvas, blocks of wood, stone or clay. As if there is anything “objective” about “art seen theoretically” in the production of art. Intuition is not always true, so it says. And emotions that overwhelm are to be revised here and there, straightened up in some parts, and now it is called art. Studies ub art become even more sturdy, logical, and scientific. A person does not need a mentor, only to enroll in college. Afterwards, there crop up a set of “dogma”. In its abstract language they are known as “structures” and “harmony”, in simple language “composition” with frills attached: balance, accent, rhythm, proportion, plasticity, and so forst. And in “pop” language it is known as “artistic”. Art becomes universal, how could it not, with its logical dogma, almost objective and scientific. Its aesthetic tendency becomes: creating something “aesthetic” or that which is pleasant, sweet, artistic, perfect, harmonious, gentle and sensitive. Isms in the art world globally is considered to be more of what is real about the art world rather than the reality itself. So that

when we return to “local” problems whether they are social or even more smaller community issues, they are thought to be too simplistic.

From a more complex expression of “emotions”, the language of art is further narrowed down into a kind of knowledge which is of course specialised. Now, is there any other possible outcome other than the alienation of art? Could there be any other possibility to look at art other than from first studying the knowledge associated with it? Is there still room for the layperson who is now exasperated since the exhibition space is open for public? Art must then become the activity of a special “minority” group, whether as the entertainment section of the upper classes or “pseudo” windows that provide an imaginary, contemplative world. An expensive souvenir as well as the stampt of a certain class.

Amidst this narrow exclusivity, “high” artistic conventions, the desire to communicate (in its real meaning, rather than philosophical communication, humanist, or whatever else), make itself heard only as a dischord. Isn’t it this discordance that has the capacity to create anxities, inertia, dissatisfaction as well as fear? Dogma may still be dogma, there is no forced dogma, but doesn’t habit or “tradition” appear to be more fearsome than criminal law? This fear may only find peace if the screams and shouts for freedom make its sound, and there doesn’t seem to be any other way other than having the courage to take up an oppositional stance and take up its consequences: to take off the “predicate of art” if needs be.

The presence of an “other” image will produce outcry. Within the boundaries of a certain existence, outcry about the limits of existence is the outcry for freedom, and it appears that the boundaries are always there. Now what is the boundaries of Indonesia’s New Art Movement ’75? Its boundary is merely the believe that its articulations depart from its own surroundings, its own self. It doesn’t speak about whether methods or structures are important, whether it is artistic or not. If this articulation is correct, every audience will feel the “sensation” that it carries, remaining to resonate without any arduous thoughts, of that which is art. As in the words of sociologist Arnold Toynbee: Every creation and innovation in art will speculate in order to make itself communicative or esoteric. The level of this “communicativeness” depends on how that articulation is sensitive to its surroundings.